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Bush reinstates bonuses

REWARD PROGRAM SUBJECT TO ABUSE, CRITICS CHARGE

By Edwin Chen
Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON - The Bush administration confirmed Wednesday that it is reinstating a bonus program under which high-ranking political appointees would be eligible for annual awards of \$10,000 or more -- a practice banned in 1994 amid concerns of possible abuse.

But the White House played down the action, likening federal "performance-based awards" to those offered in the private sector, while critics said the move further revealed President Bush's misplaced priorities and his disdain for career civil servants.

Under a March 29 directive issued without fanfare by White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card, about 2,000 political appointees throughout the administration became eligible for such bonuses, joining the 1.8-million employees in the federal work force.

"This policy is a restoration of a longstanding bipartisan policy that has been pursued by multiple American administrations because federal workers deserve to be rewarded for good work, and there should not be a distinction between those who do good work because they're civil and those who do good work because they're appointed," said Ari Fleischer, the White House press secretary. "Good work is good work."

But because all bonuses come from the same pool of funds in each department's personnel budget, and because higher-ranking political appointees traditionally receive larger payments, there will be less bonus money available for the lower-ranking civil servants, said Paul Light, director of the Center for Public Service at the Brookings Institution, a Washington public-policy center.

"It's zero-sum. It's like robbing Peter to pay Paul," he said.

Disclosure of the bonus program by the New York Times on Wednesday came at a particularly inauspicious moment for Bush.

Only last week, he cited the cost of the war on terrorism as he disclosed that he would set pay increases for federal employees at 3.1 percent, instead of the 4.1 percent sought by Congress. Several weeks earlier, he announced plans to allow the private sector to compete for nearly half of the nation's federal civilian jobs, a move that enraged labor unions and their Democratic allies in Congress.

News of the bonus program's revival prompted 90 House Democrats to accuse Bush, in a group letter organized by Rep. George Miller of Concord, of possessing "a tin ear for the economic concerns of average Americans."

The letter was signed by other House Democrats, including Mike Honda of San Jose, Pete Stark of Fremont, Barbara Lee of Oakland, Sam Farr of Salinas and Lynn Woolsey of Santa Rosa.

In a sign that at least some in the administration regard the issue as potentially a political hot potato, one agency official, requesting anonymity, said her boss, a Cabinet secretary, has decided that the department would not award bonuses to political appointees.

``It's just a difficult precedent to set," she said.

Officials at the Department of Energy also have not handed out any bonuses, said Jeanne Lopatto, a press officer. ``Obviously we're aware of the memo," she said. ``But our evaluation process is not finished yet."

One agency that has awarded bonuses is the Department of Justice, where many employees have worked unusually long hours on counterterrorism efforts.

Of 121 eligible political appointees, only 10 have received bonuses, according to a senior Justice Department official. They all have been at Justice for a year or more, and no bonus exceeded \$5,000.

No White House employee will receive a bonus, Fleischer said.

The bonus program for senior political appointees had existed for at least three decades until it was terminated eight years ago by President Clinton, in part because of a furor over awards handed out in the waning days of the departing Bush administration.

Leon Panetta, who was Clinton's chief of staff when the decision was made, said: ``My view was, this was subject to too much abuse. If you have a political appointee making a decision as to who's going to get bonuses, there's a temptation to basically help your friends."